

Asbestos sales thrive in developing countries

LOBBY GROUPS SPEND MILLIONS TO KEEP TRADE GOING

By Jim Morris
International Consortium
of Investigative Journalists

WASHINGTON - A global network of lobby groups has spent nearly \$100 million since the mid-1980s to preserve the international market for asbestos, a known carcinogen that's taken millions of lives and is banned or restricted in 52 countries, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists has found in a nine-month investigation.

Backed by public and private money and aided by scientists and friendly governments, the groups helped facilitate the sale of 2.2 million tons of asbestos last year, mostly in developing nations.

Anchored by the Montreal-based Chrysotile Institute, the network stretches from New Delhi to Mexico City to the city of Asbest in Russia's Ural Mountains. Its message is that asbestos can be used safely under "controlled" conditions.

As a result, asbestos use is growing rapidly in countries such as China and India, prompting health experts to warn of future epidemics of lung cancer, asbestosis and mesothelioma, an aggressive malignancy that usually attacks the lining of the lungs.

The World Health Organization says that 125 million people still encounter asbestos in the workplace, and the United Nations' International Labor Organization estimates that 100,000 workers die each year from asbestos-related diseases. Thousands more perish from exposures outside the workplace.

Dr. James Leigh, the retired director of the Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health at the Sydney School of Public Health in Australia, has forecast a total of 5 million to 10 million deaths from asbes-

tos-related cancers by 2030, an estimate he considers conservative.

"It's totally unethical," Jukka Takala, director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work and a former International Labor Organization official, said of the pro-asbestos campaign. "It's almost criminal. Asbestos cannot be used safely. It is clearly a carcinogen. It kills people."

A panel of 27 experts convened by the WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer reported last year: "Epidemiological evidence has increasingly shown an association of all forms of asbestos ... with an increased risk of lung cancer and mesothelioma."

The asbestos industry, however, has signaled that it will fight to protect sales of raw fiber and finished products such as asbestos cement roofing and water pipes. Among its allies are industry-funded researchers who have contributed hundreds of articles to the scientific literature claiming that chrysotile - white asbestos, the only kind sold today - is orders of magnitude less hazardous than brown or blue asbestos. Russia is the world's biggest chrysotile producer, China the biggest consumer.

"It's an extremely valuable material," argued Dr. J. Corbett McDonald, an emeritus professor of epidemiology at McGill University in Montreal who began studying chrysotile-exposed workers in the mid-1960s with the support of the Quebec Asbestos Mining Association. "It's very cheap. If they try to rebuild Haiti and use no asbestos it will cost them much more. Any health effects (from chrysotile) will be trivial, if any."

McDonald's sanguine view of chrysotile assumes that employers provide proper dust

controls, ventilation and protective equipment for workers, but public health experts say that such measures are uncommon in the developing world.

"Anybody who talks about controlled asbestos use is either a liar or a fool," said Barry Castleman, an environmental consultant based near Washington who advises the WHO on asbestos matters.

Fire- and heat-resistant, strong and inexpensive, asbestos - a naturally occurring fibrous mineral - once was seen as a construction material with near-magical properties. For decades, industrialized countries from the United States to Australia relied on it for countless products, including pipe and ceiling insulation, shipbuilding materials, brake shoes and pads, bricks, roofing and flooring.

In the early 20th century, reports of the mineral's lung-ravaging properties began to surface. By the century's end, millions of people were sick or had died from asbestos exposure, and billions of dollars in compensation had been paid to claimants.

Ninety-five percent of all the asbestos ever used has been chrysotile.

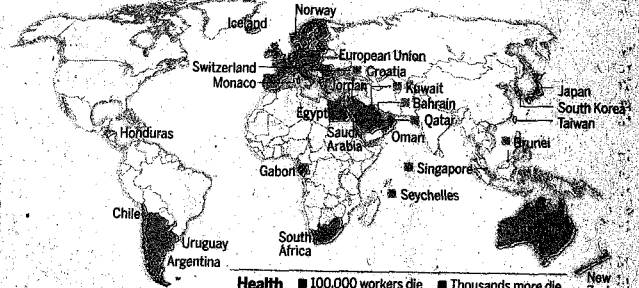
This sordid history, however, hasn't deterred the asbestos lobby, whose longtime leader is Canada. The federal government and the government of Quebec, where chrysotile has been mined for decades, collectively have given \$33.5 million to the Chrysotile Institute, formerly known as the Asbestos Institute.

Canada uses little asbestos domestically, but it sent 168,000 tons abroad last year; more than half went to India. Canada has fought to keep chrysotile from being listed under Annex III of the Rotterdam Convention, a treaty that requires exporters of hazard-

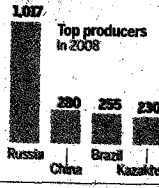
THE THREAT FROM DEADLY ASBESTOS

Asbestos, once a prized building material, is now banned or restricted in 52 countries because it causes cancer. Its use in developing nations, however, is growing thanks to a multinational lobbying campaign.

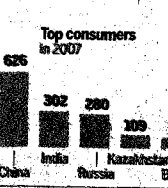
Where banned or restricted



Who deals in asbestos
In thousands of metric tons



Health effects
100,000 workers die from asbestos-related disease each year



Thousands more die from environmental exposure



What is asbestos?

- A mined fibrous mineral that is fire- and heat-resistant
- Used to make building materials, brake linings and gaskets, water pipes
- Two million metric tons mined in 2009, consumed mainly in developing nations

Sources: U.S. Geological Survey; U.N. Commodity Trade Statistics Database; U.N. Environment Program; International Ban Asbestos Secretariat; International Consortium of Investigative Journalists

ous substances to use clear labeling and warn importers of any restrictions or bans.

Despite mounting pressure from public health officials to stop asbestos exports, Canadian officials continue to defend the industry.

"Since 1979, the government of Canada has promoted the safe and controlled use of chrysotile and our position remains the same," Christian Paradis, the natural resources minister in Canada's government and a former president of the Asbestos Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said in a written statement.

Amir Attaran, an associate

professor of law and medicine at the University of Ottawa, calls the government's position unconscionable. "It's absolutely clear that (Prime Minister) Stephen Harper and his government have accepted the reality that the present course of action kills people, and they find that tolerable," Attaran said.

The Chrysotile Institute's president, Clement Godbout, said his organization's message had been misinterpreted. "We never said that chrysotile was not dangerous," he said. "We said that chrysotile is a product with potential risk and it has to be controlled. It's

not something that you put in your coffee every morning."

The institute is a purveyor of information, Godbout emphasized, not an international police agency.

"We don't have the power to interfere in any countries that have their own powers, their own sovereignty," he said.

"Dangers in the Dust: Inside the Global Asbestos Trade" is a joint investigation by the BBC's International News Services and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. To read the full report, go to www.mcclatchydc.com.